

Seminar

“Why Controlling Small Arms Matters to Women”

25th October 2011

United Nations Headquarters – New York

Opening

Ms. Sarah Masters, Women's Network Coordinator of IANSA, and Board member of the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons, opened the Seminar and thanked the Parliamentary Forum on Small Arms and Light Weapons and the UN Regional Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) for collaborating in the occasion, and gave a brief overview of IANSA's efforts to strengthen the control of arms transfers to reduce armed violence and human suffering.

She highlighted the collaboration between parliamentarians, civil society and UN entities, stating that the year 2012 will be essential for the movement against gun violence given the opportunities for action that will be brought by the Review Conference of the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms (PoA), and the negotiating conference on the Arms Trade Treaty.

She stressed that democracy and lasting peace cannot be achieved without giving women full opportunities to participate in decision and policy making in all fields, including arms control and disarmament. Thus, she welcomed the work of parliamentarians who, along their expertise in different aspects of small arms issues, promote women's rights in very different contexts ranging from their role in parliament, the potential for the arms trade treaty to help prevent violence against women and highlighting the gender dimension in the issues, to strengthen women's participation within policy making and to promote policies that need the perspectives brought by women.

In her closing remarks, she announced the launching of IANSA's new publication “Why Women: Effective Engagement for Arms Control”, and invited participants to take copies.

Presentation: “The role of Parliaments in conflict and post conflict situations”

Expert Speaker: Mr. Peter Weiderud, Secretary General of the Parliamentary Forum on SALW.

Mr. Weiderud opened his presentation by rephrasing the question of IANSA's publication to “Why NOT women?”, and selected a series of examples to demonstrate how women have, and have had, an extremely important role to fulfil in the fields related to peace and security. The Nobel Peace Prize awarded to three outstanding women this year is a clear acknowledgement of this point.

He proudly mentioned Sweden as an example of a country where no Prime Minister would dare to appoint less than half of his cabinet women, or men. This balance, however, does not mean that Sweden is gender equal but rather that women are not longer excluded from the highest level of political decision making like they used to be, and are their perspectives and experiences are gradually enabling change in our society.

In his view, the wisdom of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 lies in the idea of including women in political life as agents of change. Sustainable democracy and lasting peace cannot be achieved if women, in their role as peace makers, are not given the same opportunity as men to influence on all levels in society. Thus, women need to be fully involved.

He pointed out the importance of considering women as agents of change, leaving behind the traditional view of women subjects in need of protection or as victims. He gave the example of the Arab Spring to illustrate how women were key players in the uprising by organizing themselves, marching, blogging, hunger-striking, and,

even dying. He rightly quoted one journalist who observed: “Women may have sustained the Arab spring, but it remains to be seen if the Arab spring will sustain women”, and said that this is a critical point that remains to be seen.

He also explained that the security sector is one of the most difficult areas to restore and one of the most urgent to take care of in post conflict situations, and asserted that even here women need to be fully involved to make progress.

In his concluding remarks he mentioned that women need to be fully involved to implement the political needs that Resolution 1325 has helped us see so far.

Presentation: “The link between the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) and its potential role in helping to prevent sexual violence in conflict”

Expert Speaker: Honorable Ms. Daisy Tourné, Member of Parliament of Uruguay, and Board member of the Parliamentary Forum on SALW

MP. Tourné began her presentation reflecting the fact of being a woman, and a Parliamentarian; and referred to the efforts made by women to link sexual violence and war crimes in the negotiations of the Arms Trade Treaty in 2012.

She stated important differences between men and women. While most policy and law makers are men, the majority of victims of the use, and abuse of small arms, are women. Thus, there is a need to give women a platform to speak the truth, not only at NGO levels, but also in governmental posts. She added that the inclusion of women will make reality the implementation of, “those beautiful words behind conventions and national laws.”.

A problem of the lack of female presence in decision making positions is reflected in the abuses that occur in armed conflict, where sexual abuse has become another weapon against women. Also, in post conflict situations, women and children are again affected by insecurity, and they are not given a space to express their concerns. Their problems and needs are much too often paired together, especially in disarmament context, when in fact they are need different priorities. Women are adults who can engage in deciding over their lives, while children should be offered more protection.

Another very important problem, brought by obviously irresponsible transfers of small arms and light weapons, is domestic violence. Most of women who die from domestic abuse are murdered with those weapons. She mentioned her country, Uruguay, as an example of a peaceful and tiny country where one in every three persons possesses a gun; and the most commonly committed crime after robbery is domestic violence. The issue, however, receives very little attention because there are no women in power to stress it in the agenda.

In her closing remarks she pleaded for women to be given a place to speak the truth in simple and direct words, and to follow Resolution 1325 that promotes skills that only women have to turn beautiful words into reality.

Presentation: “Gender guidelines and UN PoA”

Expert Speaker: Nicholas Girard, Political affairs officer at the UNODA

Mr. Girard spoke on behalf of Ms. Agnes Marcaillou, Head of the Regional Disarmament Branch of the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) who wrote the introduction to IANSA’s publication “Why Women?”

He continued by quoting UN Secretary General, Mr. Ban Ki-Moon, who said that “advancing the cause of women must be an integral part of peace operations”, and stated that the need include women should not be based on that fact that is mandated by resolution 1325, but rather because they have something to contribute with.

Up until recently men were seen, and considered, as the victims of wars. But there has been a shift in this perspective, and now women are also recognized as victims of war, directly and indirectly. They are not only abused and killed during conflicts, but are also the ones to remain after a conflict. Thus, it is important to pull them out of the category of victims and to consider them as full actors beyond the scope of conflict.

Women have a potential role in the prevention of conflicts, strengthening security and stability, and are full-fledged participants in peace processes and arms transfer related issues. Research has shown that women are more likely to support strong measures to control access to small arms and they have a major role in initiatives aimed at reducing the availability and misuse of them.

He gave an example of the role of women in a gun buy-back programme in Argentina in 2007-8, that allowed anyone with a firearm to hand it in and render it unusable in exchange for cash. Despite the lack of a gender perspective in national policies to address the small arms problem, women led the way as actors.

The contribution that women can make and have made to non-proliferation, arms limitation and disarmament has been taken for granted. Nevertheless, the UN and civil society are still obliged to explain the benefits of listening to women, reading their works and following the advice, of half of the world's population. In this regard, years of work in multilateral peace operations shows that it is bad business for the UN to invest 100% of their resources in 50% of the population, and hope for 100% success rate.

In his concluding remarks he reminded that the most peaceful and stable societies are those where women are fully represented, and thus, to achieve sustainable peace and security, women have to be involved and should contribute to the debate and policies.

Q&A Session

With regards to the availability of arms and their impact to the work carried by the UN in various countries where the UN has peace building operations, Sarah Masters referred to examples from around the world, where the availability of weapons made it difficult to work due to the dangers they posed to UN officers and to politicians in general. The availability of weapons conflicts with possibilities for good governance and accountability.

With regards to the achievements made by the ATT and the UN PoA in terms of women's participation, it was discussed that so far, despite the lack of mention of small arms in both resolution 1325 and the UN PoA, other international documents and reports have made that connection. The gender issue has also been raised as important during the Preparatory Committee meetings for the ATT.

With regards to the involvement of women in peace keeping and peacebuilding process to empower them, Ms. Masters broadly referred to the differences in the impact of small arms proliferation and gun violence on the lives of women and men. While men are the direct victims who get killed, women are affected disproportionately because they are burdened with duties that will help society to carry on, even when services and infrastructure are no longer in place. They are the caregivers of societies that were left with disabled or no men.

Mr. Girard referred to a picture on IANSA's publication "Why Women?" which was taken during a project in Albania where a development program in exchange for weapons proved to be successful thanks to the involvement of women. While men in villages wanted roads to access potential tourist attraction, women expressed the real needs of public services and infrastructure to have a well functioning society again. Thus, to listen to women was essential to understand the real issues and to assess best ways to help them rebuild their villages.

Hon. Tourné highlighted the need to change the mindset that excludes women from issues supposedly reserved for men. In Uruguay, people tend to despise the fact that she is working with issues related to small arms and light weapons, but perhaps by learning of testimonies of women who managed to make positive changes in their societies this way of thinking may change.

Mr. Weiderud reflected over the fact that women take care of the fabric of society; they are more willing to choose daycares rather than roads. The key point is not to bring individual women to individual positions but to bring in perspective in to the negotiating tables.

Closing

Ms. Sarah Masters thanked all the participants and closed the seminar with the words of Michelle Bachelet, former Chilean President and head of UN Women, "I know from my own experience that there are no limits to what a woman can do, so let's go ahead and encourage more women to get involved in the efforts against small arms and light weapons".

The end